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Lewis, Gail (2017) Questions of presence. *Feminist Review* 117 (1), pp. 1-19. ISSN 0141-7789.

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## Questions of Presence<sup>i</sup>

## **Abstract**

This article considers some of the ways in which ‘the black woman’ as both representation and embodied, sentient being is rendered visible and invisible and to link these to the multiple and competing ways in which she is ‘present’. The issues are engaged through three distinct but overlapping conceptualisations of ‘presence’. ‘Presence’ as conceived (and highly contested) in performance studies; ‘presence’ as conceived and worked with in psychoanalysis; and ‘presence’ as decolonising political praxis among indigenous communities. I use these conceptualisations of presence to consider the various ways in which the black woman as figure and as embodied/sentient subject has been made present/absent in different discursive registers. I also explore what is foreclosed and how this is itself linked to legacies of colonial ‘worlding’. I end with consideration of alternative modes of black women’s presence and how this offers a resource for new modes of sociality.

## **Keywords**

*Black women; presence; colonial violence; de-gendering; psychosocial; triangular space*

## **Introduction**

I sit at my desk, pen in hand above a sheet of white paper (yes, pen and paper), hovering as I wait for the words with which I will open this article to emerge allowing me to begin to scribe.

I wait.

My eyes run along the book shelves and come into focus on *The Black Presence in English Literature* (Dabydeen, 1985); next to that a pamphlet published by Runymede Trust on *Undocumented Lives: Britain's Unauthorized Migrant Workers* (Ardill and Cross, 1988). Along from those, sitting on the backs of a few books that lie flat, squeezed out from the overfull shelves, is a vinyl album *My Name is Albert Ayler* released in 1964 by one of the most haunting and inspiring saxophonists of all time. Like Miles announcing the *Birth of the Cool* (1957)<sup>ii</sup>, Albert's *My Name is...* was to become a milestone in the announcement of the arrival of the 'new jazz'.

More pertinently for this essay, what I'm struck by is that each of these items in some way or another signal something about the 'presence' of racialized persons – Dabydeen and the bringing together of 'black' and 'English literature' as if the presence of the former in the latter is at best a surprise, at worst oxymoronic. Ardill and Cross making present those people deemed 'excess', illegal and illegitimate. Vital to the ongoing life of Britain but disappeared by the state within whose very interstices the women and men carry out functions essential to the reproduction of bodies of both individuals and the social body at large. Albert declaring his as a presence that should – nay will be – remembered.

The page is still blank. My eye starts to roam again and falls upon another historical indication that the question of presence in regard to black women's bodies in the contemporary moment is indeed an arena to be explored. June Jordan's 1976 "declaration of an independence [she] would just as soon not have" says:

I would hope that the sum total of the liberation struggles I have attempted to sketch, and briefly to criticize, would mean this: that I will be free to be who I am, Black and female, without fear, without pain, without humiliation. That I will be free to become

whatever my life requires of me, without posturing, without compromise, without terror  
(1976:115)

Here then is a declaration of *presence*, not just an unwanted independence, through the double and inseparable vectors ‘black’ and ‘female’ proclaimed as a desire for recognition and space in a multitude of struggles that have a history of erasing, marginalising and even denouncing some aspect of who she is and might become.

Together these four objects point to the multivalency of ‘presence’ – as involving ‘positive’ and ‘negative’; as the ability to produce being and connection; as involving conflicting emotions educed in the encounter between identity and otherness; as involving forces that propel into invisibility and/or visibility; as involving creativity and destruction; as involving reckoning and transformation. And if they signal this complex terrain they should not be thought of as relevant only to an earlier, twentieth century moment in the life of Britain – a moment now supposedly superseded in these neo-liberal times that some call post-race, post-feminist. The forces that rallied around and subsequently voted in Donald Trump as President of the USA and voted the UK out of the EU in the Brexit referendum indicate that the fault-lines that have run through the social, political and cultural landscapes are now well and truly gaping and represent a clear and present danger. And while the 2017 General Election in the UK attests to a growing ideological contestation to the terms of governing by austerity, the danger persists. The associative trail triggered by the objects make the hand begin to shake – what follows is its record.

My aim is to consider some of the ways in which ‘the black woman’ as both representation and embodied, sentient being is rendered visible and invisible and to link these to the multiple and competing ways in which she is made ‘present’ and declares her presence otherwise. The issues are engaged through three distinct but overlapping conceptualisations of ‘presence’. ‘Presence’ as conceived (and highly contested) in performance studies; ‘presence’ as conceived and worked with in the British School of psychoanalysis; and ‘presence’ as decolonising political praxis among indigenous communities.

Although the concept of presence as understood and mobilised in performance studies was a concept that fell out of favour under the impact of the theoretical turn to language and its performatives, in the 1960s and 1970s ‘presence’ assumed a central position in the praxis of performance. In this context it spoke to two features. The special quality of the actor – the actor’s aura (something that could be harnessed through the intensities of rehearsal (Goodall,

2008); and desire on the part of the spectator for whom presence conjures a desiring subject constituted through loss and absence (Goodall, 2008:11). Theatre offers the potential for us to “...find a present beyond the limitations of the present, a selfhood beyond the limits of self...We identify with actors because the self longs for clarification, because it longs to possess itself in the present, in a way that ordinary space, time and selfhood do not allow” (Goldman, 1975:160-1, cited in Fuchs, 1985:164).

Presence in this frame is also a temporal concept in that the spectator inhabits a dual temporality in the moment of consumption of the performance: the fictional time *in* the narrative; and the social here-and-now *of* the performance (Goodall, 2008). This gives the desiring subject that is the spectator not just a phantasy of completeness but also the phantasy of command over time and space. Implicit in this formulation is the idea that ‘presence’ is always constituted in relation to loss and ‘absence’. Indeed, it was the switch to an emphasis on an “aesthetics of absence” in performance theory that characterised the poststructuralist turn (Carlson, 1996).

This conceptualisation of presence as having at its centre not just an acting subject with a particular aura but more pertinently a desiring subject in spectatorship seeking that which is lost and absent, opens a pathway to presence and absence in psychoanalytic approaches to subjectivity. In psychoanalysis not only is the subject split between her desire to be and her desire to have the other, there is also a gap between the subject who desires and the object of the subject’s desiring, i.e. the separateness of subject and object. Yet it is in this gap between presence and absence – the difference that is constituted by the separateness of self and other (object) - that the space for the generation of meaning emerges (Ogden, 1992a and b; 1994). What is key is that ‘meaning’ is generated through reflexive elaborations of subjective experience (being), experiences that are in themselves constituted in the context of absence (non-being). For meaning to be generated and the possibility for a third space to emerge, a capacity for symbolic thought is required and this in its turn is both an effect of, and occurs in, the *dynamic* space between presence and absence. Symbolic thinking itself is a capacity to generate presence in absence and absence in presence (Ogden, 1992a and b), from which a “third area of experiencing” is created (Winnicott, 1953/71). Writing in the register of the Kleinian conception of ‘good and bad breast’, Rachel Peltz (1998) poses the paradoxical dynamic of presence and absence in these terms. Thus ‘presence’ represents “... all that is good, fulfilling, and knowable” including “the experience of absolute immediacy”. Here there is no gap between self and other. Absence represents the opposite – fear, frustration,

the unknown and fragmentation. But significantly “the *polarization* of presence and absence *forecloses* the possibility of the emergence of new meaning. Presence and absence are necessarily and paradoxically related” (Peltz, 1998:388, my emphases). This is because it is the dynamic between them in the psychic life of the experiencing subject that new meaning and the possibility of becoming a-new and relating across separateness emerges.

If coming-into-being differently occurs in the paradoxical and shifting space that is formed in the dialectic of presence and absence, presence as configurations of practice (of doing, as opposed to [simply] naming) in diverse cultural forms such as economy, arts, sexuality, cooking, cleaning, gendering, can also be conceived as a decolonising move when apprehended through cosmologies of Indigenous peoples. Nishnaabeg<sup>iii</sup> activist, scholar, teacher Leanne Simpson says that it is engagement and relationality with both the living and spirit world, that generates meaning in Indigenous cultures, and most especially doing, where ‘doing’ is a compound of practices, thoughts, memories, embodiment. This requires presence and the help of the spiritual world which intervenes through dreams and the process of doing (Simpson, 2011:93; see also de Finney, 2016). Presence, or in fact the verb ‘presencing’, which Simpson conceptualises as a process of ‘here-ness’ and ‘aliveness’, is a decolonial move through which counter-histories, counter-spatialities, subaltern epistemologies and modes of being are created and announced. Citing Nishnaabe curator Wanda Nanibush (2010), Simpson explains that the counter-knowledge “is created and communicated through the movement of body and sound, testimony and witnessing, remembering, protest and insurrection, by creating a space of storied presencing, alternative imaginings, transformation, reclamation – resurgence” (Simpson, 2011:96).

In other words, ‘presencing’ is an epistemological and ontological praxis of emergence based on felt connection among human and non-human; ancestral and contemporary life. It contests and has the potential to detoxify the effects of colonial discourse (historical and contemporary) in which Indigenous peoples are rendered invisible and/or insensible.

In what follows I use these conceptualisations of presence to consider the various ways in which the black woman as figure and as embodied/sentient subject has been made present/absent in different discursive registers. I also explore what is foreclosed and the consequences of this for ethical social relations. The article is presented in different registers of ‘voice’. The following section is a cry in which a recent act of appalling state violence enacted on the body and person of a black woman in London can be linked to a long trail of

colonial practice in which ‘black’ and ‘woman’ were mutually exclusive terms under conditions of Atlantic enslavement. This might be thought of as rendered in the cry of the Blues. I then turn attention to look briefly at some of the ways in which ‘black woman’ (as African, African-Caribbean, Mixed, and as Asian) is and isn’t made visible in statistics of official accounting – a play of absence and presence that is always premised on deficiency or lack in that the orthodoxy is to disconnect such statistics from the dynamic effects of intersectional assemblages of power through which black women’s contemporary subjectivisation is achieved. Here the cadence shifts to a more muted tone perhaps more akin to what we once used to call ‘muzak’ – that insipid mix of notes and chords that produced a background hum, indistinct but continually present establishing a mode of engagement in which a presence and encounter of vitality between self and other is foreclosed so that the human-ness of both is thwarted even while each others’ lives share a common materiality. The fourth section considers what is available but which gets ‘lost’ in the multitude of publications that are deemed essential academic reading. If I had the competence this would be in the rhythms, vibrancy, grittiness and astute lyrical observation of Grime: alas I don’t have that competency but I trust that you, as reader, can conjure the sound and urgency of that musical genre.

### **Presence through Violence**

#Say her name

Sarah Reed

#Say her name

Sarah Reed

#Say her name

Sarah Reed

Sarah Reed                      Présenté, Présenté, Présenté

Sarah Reed, beautiful, troubled black woman – I saw your picture burst out from the black and white print of the newspaper – and the deep sadness in your eyes, along with the shy smile hailed me. In my heart I screamed:



Sister! – No! No! No! Not another black woman dead by the hands – or in the folds – of the state

Not another black body brutalised and snuffed out – like some grotesque of the most grotesque porn movie. Not another. Not once but repeatedly.

Each time this or that or the other state agency failed you – failed to say your name because to do so would be to recognise you as a *person* – a sentient woman waiting to be discovered and engaged

But instead called you as an act of obliteration as if you were only another of the despised

Because black

Because female

Because in need

Because in pain

Because *present*

#say her name – Sarah Reed

#say her name – Sarah Reed

#say her name – Sarah Reed

Présenté, présenté, présenté

Sarah Reed, in February 2016 your picture was everywhere and I was haunted and in being haunted I was consumed and confused and I didn't quite know why –

I mean I did because yours was another ungrievable life, another abused and thwarted potentiality – but there was something else in your ghostly presence that I carried round in the seemingly disconnected but nevertheless associated thought “I wonder what happened to that woman...”

And then I knew as a memory was conjured like a bolt by the TV footage later that night showing an old clip of her – you – talking to broadcasters about another occasion on which you had been brutalised by the state and its agents. In that footage I knew those eyes and that

voice – because at one time, not too long before this February evening, I had stood directly in front of those eyes and had heard that voice up close.....

You see a black woman I came to know to be Sarah Reed once asked me for some help, some money to get to the place she needed to be.

It was outside King's Cross Station – the entrance/exit just near St Pancras – and I had been in the British Library immersed in the Reports on child sexual exploitation in Rotherham and Oxford, those Reports (e.g. Jay, 2014) that said the appalling abuses and brutalisations were the result of what they termed 'Pakistani- heritage culture'. In other words, they developed a supposedly explanatory trail between sexual abuse and minoritised culture when every 'culture' in Rotherham, including the institutional cultures of the many public sector organizations that had failed those white and brown working class girls and young women, were implicated. And I was deeply disturbed and troubled and a young [to me], beautiful but distressed black woman drew me out of my melancholic reverie when she said:

"can you help me? And I stopped and said what do you need and she said "I need some money"...

And we spoke, and I don't remember exactly but it must have been about me wanting to give her some but being concerned about what she would use it for, as if she would become beholden to provide me with explanation if I were to give her some money. But I said: would she be safe and she was saying things like I need to get to somewhere – and I don't remember where she said but it was on the other side of London – and I do remember that as I gave her £20, still talking about what she would use it for...

She stood up straight, looked me eye to eye and said in a voice that declared her challenge and claim to presence and dignity

"What do you want me to do?; what do you want me to do?"

And I said:

"Not do anything to hurt yourself, there is enough to hurt you out there already"

And we continued to hold eyes for 5 seconds and then she was gone....

Until, until, until

Until Wednesday 3<sup>rd</sup> 2016 February when I saw a picture of a young black woman staring out at me from the front page of *The Guardian*

She had been found dead in Holloway Prison on 11<sup>th</sup> January 2016, and I would know her name –

#Say her name – Sarah Reed

#Say her name – Sarah Reed

#Say her name – Sarah Reed

Presenté, présenté, présenté

But if she *is* present, how is she here?

Only as: ‘brutalised black woman’?

Only as: a ‘haunted black woman’?

Only as: a ‘mentally unwell black woman’?

What is it we know when we #say her name? Is her name a boundary limit inviting exploration and the possibility of connection (Bion, 1970; Armstrong, 2005); or a boundary limit of disgust and erasure?

“Black woman”, “lost baby”, “mental health issues”, “wrongly accused”, “savagely beaten” – as if knowing these things as events in her life gives us all there is to know about a person named Sarah Reed.

So do we close down or open up; close down or open up, close down in manic grievance or open up in grief and a call of righteous protest and insistent curiosity to know how we might be here as black women, white women, Asian women, Arab women, women cis and women trans, standing alongside Sarah Reed? Do we, with Caetano Veloso’s *Paloma* in our minds, hold her as gentle as a wounded dove as we gesture toward recuperation and healing and gather her up as a member of the collective *we* might bring into being.

In the face of stories of brutalisation such as that shown in the footage of Sarah Reed at the hands of a policeman in a London police station

(<https://www.theguardian.com>feb>sarahreed>) it is clear that the political, ethical, relational

challenge posed by the presence of ‘the black woman’ involves the generation (again) of a “capacity for concern” (Winnicott, 1962/65). Such a capacity for concern rests on the psychic ability to really face and acknowledge the feared or actual harm done to the other with whom you are simultaneously proximate and distant. That this is a psychic capacity (or incapacity) does not render it a concern outside of the realm of ethical social relation. On the contrary, such a capacity is central to practices of relationality since this is as much governed by phantasies about those with whom we interact or are part of the world in which we live, as it is by the social and other materialities upon and through which our encounters with others are staged. As such it tests a capacity to use naming as a doorway towards the other in an attempt to make present in a meaningful way the things brought together under the sign of the name – Sarah Reed - #Say her name; Sandra Bland - #Say her name<sup>iv</sup>; Eleanor Bumpers #Say her name; Mya Hall #Say her name; Aiyana Stanks-Jones #Say her name; Cherry Groce #Say her name – all black women brought down at the hands of the state – and then in the here-and-now of encounter, move to the generation of some shared understanding of how she, they, touch us. How we touch one another as we become more than ourselves in that moment of connection. How, in other words, we engage in a praxis of ‘presencing’ in the mode articulated by the Nishnaabeg.

But what would the possibility of growth in the presence of ‘black woman’ require? One thing would be to acknowledge what becomes absent in us when we absent or disappear her particularity from our collective histories, current realities, future potentialities. Another requirement would involve development of our courage to acknowledge the harm done her, historically and in the here and now, by utilising the resources we have in the archive in the interests of practising presencing. And such resources are to be found. Those left us, for example, by Audre Lorde who reminded us that “...we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals”, instead reifying those differences as insurmountable obstacles preventing new and different connections in the service of “creative change” (Lorde, 1984a:115). Similar to the significance accorded the libidinal in psychoanalysis, Lorde also bequeathed us an understanding of the erotic as a powerful resource through which to conjure the patterns and practices for an ethical relating across our human differences (1984b).

Starting here, we might walk a theoretical line to psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion, who told us that in naming something we begin a journey into the unknown. This is because for him naming is a way of holding together a set of phenomena not yet understood (singly or in

connection) but by which we are disturbed and around which we need to develop a capacity to ‘think’. “[T]he name is an invention to make it possible to think and talk about something before it is known what that something is. ...Once a name has been given and the scattering thereby prevented, meaning can begin to accumulate.” (Bion, 1963/89:87-88).

#Say her name – Sarah Reed

#Say her name – Cynthia Jarrett (1985)

#Say her name – Joy Gardner (1993)

Presenté, Présenté, Présenté

But as we say their names, remember that what is at stake involves reckoning with the contemporary effects of historical legacies left as the traces of the ‘peopling’ of the world in the structural, symbolic and psychic imprints of the imperial and neo-colonial present. In the context of my focus here, the history of structurally and ideologically legitimated violence so central to the making and sustaining of racial formation in the triangular space that is the after-effect of transatlantic enslavement, would render the figure – let alone her embodied presence – ‘black woman’ an oxymoron if not an impossibility.

The notion of triangular space can engage geo-historical and psychic registers, both of which relate to questions of presence, as I consider below. At this point though, we should make no mistake about it, the legacies of the assemblages of power that marked the triangular space of Atlantic enslavement continue to be traceable from Brazil to the USA to Jamaica to Britain in the practices of both state agencies<sup>v</sup> and the quotidian of civil society.

Take this as an example:

“It will be refreshing to have a classy, beautiful, dignified first lady in the White House. I’m tired of seeing a [sic] Ape in heels”, so said one Pamela Ramsey Taylor from Clay County, West Virginia, to which local mayor, Beverly Whaling expressed her pleasure since it “just made my day Pam” (BBC news, 15/11/16)<sup>vi</sup>.

Or this:

*Michelle Obama is A Man!!...*

... screamed the on-line ‘news’ headlines that circulated widely during the 2016 campaign for US President. Like those that said Obama was ‘really’ a Muslim and ‘really’ not born in the USA, they were part of a campaign to make ‘America’ not just Republican, not just anti-establishment but ‘great’, that is white again. By which I mean constructed in the image of intersecting normativities deemed commensurate with WASP ideology and its narcissistic fantasy/phantasy of completeness, independence, controlled rationality. Hilary Clinton could not become the next President not just because of the emails, not just because she was more of the same elite, not just because of her husband’s sexual behaviour, not even because she is a woman. BUT because she is a white woman who would ‘inherit’ from a black man! Such a miscegenated administration and lineage was too much to bear – and the writers of blogs were attacking on the well-trodden grounds of gender, sexuality and race with disgraceful and eloquent flair.

But like the eddies of the waters of the Middle Passage, these and other ‘news’ announcements emanated not only from within the USA but the middle of Europe. The one declaring Michelle Obama to be a man, was among several traced to Macedonia where, we are told, there are many Trump supporters and many a young white man who, albeit while making a lot of money, circulated these lies. Lies, that would seem too ridiculous to take at all seriously, if not for the election of Donald Trump, if not for the Brexit vote, if not for the mounting axis of victorious right wing, anti-democratic, sometimes semi-fascist politicians/parties/organisations.

But there is worse, potentially more peril in our midst, for if they are lies of ludicrous proportions, (and herein lays their danger) they are lies that tap into the construction of gender as always already raced as white. For what ‘Michelle Obama is a man’ *really means* is that *she is not a woman*.

Magazines, films, ads, - they all tell us who counts as a ‘real’ woman – even if there is a smattering of the odd light brown-skinned, more often than dark brown-skinned woman of colour to show they recognise “the diverse world we live in”.

Such vacuous gestures aside, what ‘Michelle Obama is a man’ hooks into is the circuit through which the world was and is ‘peopled’(Wynter, 2000) in that frame of modernity’s ‘worlding’ (Spivak, 1985; Said, 1984) that materialised as enslavement, indentureship and other colonial violences and their after-life – and in *that* she is *not* a woman. Violence was (is?) the axis around which those constructed as men and those constructed as women turned

(turns) and raciology was (is) the epistemological frame that simultaneously instantiated that violent boundary of gender production and legitimated the enactment of physical violence on the flesh.

If we travel with Jamaican theorist, novelist, dancer Silvia Wynter (2000; 1994) we come to understand that the peopling of the world inaugurated with Europe's global expansion into the territories it would incorporate and dominate in its various competing but duplicate (from the vantage point of those dominated) empires, involved divisions into genders and races. But in this only white people were 'true' men and 'true' women – 'Man's human Others', Wynter tells us (2000:174), were indio/indias; negros/negras; etc. 'Women' were by definition 'white', and then there were a series of sub-classifications, such as the above or later with settler colonialism there were the 'true' women of the settler class and the 'native women' of the colonised (Stoler, 2002). And in the early twenty-first century we have "apes in heels"; "cheering, flag waving picaninnies ...[and] tribal warriors ...[with] watermelon smiles"; and [football players with Nigerian ancestry evoking] "a similar feeling when seeing a gorilla at the zoo"<sup>vii</sup>; not to mention the physical assaults and deaths enacted on black women and men in the heartlands of the so-called democratic world.

Such violent epistemological re-coding of humanity, was, in the conditions of genocide and plantation society throughout the Americas (which includes the Caribbean and is thus part of the history of Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, The Netherlands), accompanied by actual physical violence and bodily mutilation in which gender difference itself was erased (Spillers, 1987/2003).

So following the trail set by the Macedonian blog 'news', through the analytic lens of Wynter, let's now listen to Hortense Spillers (1987/2003:207) as she reads William Goodell's (1853) historically contemporaneous account of the tools and use of violence on the bodies of the enslaved:

"The smack of the whip is all day long in the ears of those who are on the plantation, or in the vicinity; and it is used with such dexterity and severity as not only to lacerate the skin, but to tear out small portions of the flesh at almost every stake'. [Spillers continues] The anatomical specifications of rupture, of altered human tissue, take on the objective description of laboratory prose – eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet'.

These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color (Spillers, 1987/2003:207).

In this brutal economy of fleshy control and command ‘ethnicity’ marks the site of the raced body’s appearance and presence, along with the black woman’s de-gendered body’s disappearance. If she is not a gendered subject hers is in some sites of plantation economy a reproductive body as in the USA where reproduction of the enslaved population was through the use of black women as ‘breeders’. In the Caribbean, reproduction of the enslaved population was achieved through the importation of more human cargo (Reddock, 1985). In either case, hers was an animalistic body which was marked as such – a marking that traversed the landscape of colonial rule. If this is doubted we need only recall the British corralling of Kenyan women involved, or thought to be, in the Mau Mau rebellion. In this space of resistance, the detention camps were divided into separate compounds each named after an animal accorded high symbolic value in Kikuyu cosmology so that women were dehumanised, the non-human debased, and the local population intimidated and criminalised. The women were corralled into these differentiated areas and organised according to the symbolic animals with which they were equated. ‘Hyenas’ if wearing the enforced single metal band; ‘goats’ for those who had two metal bands forced on them; or ‘cows’ where it was three bands (Elkins, 2005:223). So hers is a raced body rendered animalistic and positioned as a sexual object, who can, would be and is raped and otherwise sexually violated. But not a gendered body and thus she can become subject to what “we imagine as the peculiar province of *male* brutality and torture inflicted by other males. A female body strung from a tree limb, or bleeding from the breast on any given day of field work because the ‘overseer’, ..., has popped her flesh open ... [is] materialized scene of unprotected female flesh – of female flesh ‘ungendered’...” (Spillers, 1987/2003:207, original emphasis ).

### **Presence and Absence : in the documentary archive**

*angry black woman, ball-busting black woman, black Barbie, bobblehead, big-lipped, fat arsed, tar baby, man-hating because ambitious, baby mother black woman, bad black woman.*

In this fleshy, de-gendered presence in the Western world, black women are discursively and inter-subjectively ‘skinned’ of (our) capacity for ‘feeling’ – we can be angry, aggressive, threatening, even physically (too) powerful (think of the commentary that inevitably



accompanies any radio or television coverage of a Serena Williams match (see also Rankine, 2015) but not ‘feeling’ in the form of pain, tenderness, ordinary emotional need, desire, vulnerability or pleasure (see also Kinouoni, 2017 for a powerful and brave commentary).

And oh what a paradox – The black woman among the poorest in society and yet too austere to be loved, to love, to hold her intimates close. Austere not hurt by austerity. Receiver of benefits but not beneficent. And in some cruel echo of the ‘breeder’ discourse that circulated among some of the plantocracy, bearer of children but not maternal. In these neo-liberal times this has profound implications for the modes of demographic representation and calculus. The ‘no-person’ personification of now you see it, now you don’t, the black woman pops in and out of presence in the statistical snap-shots of the social topography, perceptible in the peripheral vision of governmental calculus but not to be brought into fleshy, embodied and complex presence, despite being scarred by increasing inequality and ‘new hierarchies of belonging’ (Back, Sinha and Bryan, 2012).

This oscillation between numeric presence and absence re-enacts black women’s un-gendering by weaving it into the fabric of neo-liberalism’s demographic reckonings. In the dynamic interplay of presence and absence in official accounting practice, she is lost between the categorical boundaries that render her everywhere and nowhere, even while she is fleshily, materially and psychically profoundly affected by neo-liberalism’s modes of ruling through austerity. In this the statistics deliver her back into the established processes of subjection as non-person.

A few figures from areas of statistical accounting illustrate the point

#### *Policing and criminal justice:*

Out of 3,850 deaths in custody between 1990 -2016, 444 were recorded as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME), and 175 as women. Deaths in police custody or by shooting between 1990 -2017 are recorded as 161 (INQUEST, 2017). BAME people in police custody are “significantly” more likely to be physically restrained than white people, the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (2016) tells us. And that black people in England are three times more likely to be victims of murder; four times more likely to be stopped and searched by police. At the same time, not only has racially motivated hate crime increased exponentially since the Referendum on EU membership in June 2016 but such motivation accounts for 82% of the total recorded hate crime in England and Wales.

Alarming as these figures from the area of criminal justice are, and in a cruel ‘performance’ of Performance Studies’ conception of conjuring presence through absence, what is notable is how the person – black woman – disappears yet somewhere she inhabits the shadows, present in her marked absence. And when she does appear we see just how she is impacted by governance by austerity. The Women’s Budget Group (2016), undertook an intersectional analysis of the effects of austerity policies on women, and found that by 2020 the impact of austerity on the poorest 33% of black women will mean a reduction in household income of £1900; £2000 for Asian women; for the middle 33% the figures are £1550 for black women and £800 for Asian women; and even for the richest 33% the figures are £1000 and £800 respectively. For white men there is a tiny increase. Omar Khan, Director of the Runnymede Trust, on receiving the WBG report, said “Black women suffer the cumulative effect of measures that disadvantage women and ethnic minorities” (cited in WBG, 2016:4). Other figures show similar patterns of disproportionality in relation to health. For example, black African women have a mortality rate four times higher than that for white women. Black African women are seven times more likely to be detained (sectioned) under Mental Health legislation; black British women four times more likely to be so sectioned; and those of mixed ethnicity also seven times more likely (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2016). Meanwhile in terms of violence from partners, data show that three out of four black or Asian women seeking refuge from domestic violence are turned away (Sisters’ Uncut, 2016).

These are of course only a few indicative figures that illustrate black women’s oscillating presence and absence as a specific subject in practices of demographic accounting. But one can also read them as a kind of palimpsest in that they speak of something more complex and a complexity born of the convergence and intertwining of colonial ‘worlding’ with contemporary neo-liberal ideology and post-colonial anxiety. On the one hand, we can read her ‘absence’ within the figures for both the categories ‘BAME’ and ‘Women’ as a contemporary instantiation of her de-gendering. She cannot be made visible in ‘Women’ because she is not fully one since such a person is always already constituted as white. At the same time she cannot be made visible in ‘BAME’ because though in one sense a heterogeneous category ‘containing’ multiple ethnicities, in gender terms it is an homogenising category wherein specificities of the social, emotional and psychic organisation and effects of gender do not matter. On the other hand, when the figure of the black woman is brought into the frame what begins to creep into view are the failures and

limits of what Hall and O'Shea (2014) have referred to as the hallmark of the commonsense of neo-liberalism, namely fairness. If 'fairness' is the name of the game that guarantees equality of opportunity, and if black women aren't cutting it, then this is a condition of their own making, and it is she, not the structures that need attending to. In this ideological frame, present only as a figure of 'deficiency' and 'lack', how is the ungendered, 'deficient', 'ball-breaking', 'aggressive' black woman to craft her presence otherwise as feeling, thinking, embodied, *affected* and *affecting* in these times?

For at its heart, the neo-liberal subject in contemporary Britain is a properly responsabilised cis man: self-actualising, independent and properly 'head' of household. He is not responsible for the children of another man – summed up in 'hard working families' not being responsible for those who, through fecklessness and behavioural irrationality (Pykett, 2012), either refuse to do the right thing or fail to make the right choices (which would render them in need of the behavioural adjustment known as 'nudge' (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008). The state's role in this project is to ensure such a subject is possible and it is profoundly gendered, raced, classed, heteronormative terrain in the image of Whiteness and not a terrain that foregrounds the presence of black women, cis and trans, as feeling, thinking, embodied persons.

### **Presence in other modes**

If the impress at the top of the palimpsest represents presence and absence of black women through deficiency, what forms of presence and being-ness might be revealed if, with precision and delicacy of hand, we bring to the fore the layers to be found in the depths. What other histories might be inscribed in the cross currents of triangular space in which black women reside and craft their presence and lived and ancestral connections?

Let me begin by repeating something that should by now be well-known. Black British feminism emerged in the spaces in which Caribbean, Asian, Arab and African women sought to craft a politics and indeed ethics of presence. It speaks a genealogy not just of biographical or geographical heritage, or even of one of the refrains around which we united and declared our presence as 'black' – 'we are here because you were there'. Or rather it *is* this latter but refracted through another lens in the colonial/postcolonial optic. This is the issue of what the Cuban writer Benítez-Rojo calls the 'repeating island' (1992). One feature of the repeat that rolls across the archipelago of the Caribbean are the colonial assemblages of power relations and their architectonics of the fleet, the mine and the plantation. But there are also the

repeating histories produced by African, Asian, European and Indigenous people as they became entangled in the confluence of Caribbean Sea and Atlantic Ocean. If grounded in a violent penetration of and command over human and non-human life, this meeting point also laid the grounds for modes of becoming otherwise. As he mobilises an imagination in terms of gender bifurcation, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) states "Benítez-Rojo imagines the region's femininity as 'its flux, its diffuse sensuality, its generative force, its capacity to nourish and conserve.'" (Benítez-Rojo, 1996:2, in Tinsley, 2008:197). While this offers a viewpoint into a different kind of flow still more is needed since, though Caribbean femininity is rendered otherwise, it is as metaphor, *not* as experiencing, embodied black woman (Tinsley, 2008). Here we can return to Simpson's notion of presencing since it shifts from metaphor to phenomenology in that what is required in the praxis of presencing is a mode of engagement that has embodied, feeling, remembering, experiencing subjects at its core. Embodied feeling subjects who might catch sight of and value numerous expressions of a capacity for concern (Winnicott, 1962/65), "response-ability" (Oliver, 2004) and desire ethical connection between agentic subjects whose capacity for *presence-in-relation* is crafted in the deepest cross currents of overlapping constellations of power. From the stance of those who rebuffed a version of performance theory that privileged presence and the desiring spectator, this might seem like an adherence to a long since undermined conception of wholeness, but from the point of view of those always already excluded from modernity's inscription as subject, it is a decolonising move in which presence becomes something warm, fleshy, substantial and rooted – an ego-syntonic and communal experience of 'completeness' for those who have not even been counted/imagined as 'person'. Then ... and now.

That presence and connection might be formed by subaltern subjects in the complicated waters of diaspora and its radical hybridity seems to offer a way of becoming-in-relation that is supremely suited to the conditions of contemporary Britain. A figure that might mark the site of hope when to be hopeful seems to indicate being out of touch with reality. And while in these post-Brexit times ("get over it" I hear them say) for some at least, holding onto the idea of hope, along with the figure who might symbolise it, is ever more challenging, it was never more needed.

One such figure might be the black woman in her collective push against the violences of fleshy, experiential and epistemological erasure. Such a subject might be found: might declare her presence. And of course she is all around and is so as creative producer of her own presence. But if she is to be of use in the generation of new forms of sociality, she has to

be found and recognised – not by-passed as having only to do with that kind of statistically interstitial figure who pops in and out of visibility depending how much ‘lack’ needs to be charted; or how much the neo-liberal project of ‘fairness’ is falling short, or the extent to which she is (or might be) included in descriptions of Britain’s ‘super-diverse’ cities and towns.

One place could be to see her in the available print and web-based media. Take, for example, one recently published book (and its dis-appearances). This book called *Learning in Womanist Ways* (Etienne, 2016) is about (to quote from the cover):

*Learning in Womanist Ways explores the benefits of lifelong learning for black Caribbean women who came to Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. The book features interviews of these women about their experiences of formal and informal learning, uniquely set out as dramatic scenes that reveal the women’s authentic voices as they are in their communities.*

*This insightful account challenges the notion that being black, female and older means deteriorating health, poverty and isolation. Presenting a different and positive reality, the book combines contemporary narrative study with black feminist epistemology, exploring the social and cultural identities brought to learning.*

*Set against a backdrop of shifting policies and diminishing resources for adult learning, this book acknowledges the global challenge of an ageing society and demonstrates the crucial role of informal learning in widening educational opportunities*

If we read the claims to ‘authenticity’ as claims about emotional and experiential ‘truths’/integrity and understand these as always contingent psychosocial productions, this book (and others like it) announces black women’s presence in no uncertain terms but in ways that offer a glimmer of hope in its depictions of how the women at its heart embody a “going-on-being” (Winnicott, 1960:590) even when all the established ways in which they are ‘known’ would evacuate their being-ness. The book offers a collection of black women’s voices that speak against what Wynter has called “our narratively condemned status” (1994:70).

Yet this book, like the presence of black women in the statistical archive becomes constantly invisible – it is in the catalogue but missing from the shelves. A kind of paginated and bound enactment of the refusal to hold the *black woman present as a maker of knowledge and new modes of becoming* that is so oft repeated across the landscape of Euro-America, including, perhaps especially, the academy in Britain. While making use of available resources in print and web-based media is a key element, the task is in fact far more socially and psychically demanding. For if the participants to Etienne’s project provide numerous, patterned, if not ceremonial, practices of presencing, the enormity of the challenge involved in really seeing and engaging such participants as inscribed with social and experiential value beyond their specific locations and ‘communities’ and thus as a resource for the formulation of new kinds of sociality, can be gleaned if we think with psychoanalysis together with performance studies. As performer and theorist, Sandra L. Richards (2006:413), in thinking about the complexities of travel to ‘the gate of no return’ along points of Africa’s west coast by members of the Atlantic diaspora, reminds us, “...a play in the theatre, seeks to create an illusion or transform an abstract absence into a palpable presence”, our link to that “palpable presence” is complex and ordered through hierarchies of power. What performance studies’ theorisation of presence offers then is a warning to beware the fantasy of the power to collapse time/space and to confuse identity with relationality. Thus if identification with the present as conjured through absence signals desire, it also signals a danger. Danger that we displace the very object we conjure in our need for it and collapse separateness into sameness (Richards, 2006).

In the frame produced by the conjunction of psychoanalytic and performance studies theory, the capacity to generate new meaning is a function of the dynamic tension between presence and absence, and requires symbolic thinking to both facilitate a sense of enduring connection between self and other (object) *and* to shatter any sense of narcissistic omnipotence or finally reached completeness, or of identity as opposed to relationality. In this then, the whole racial order, in which whiteness positions itself as at the centre and commander of all human and non-human life, is at stake. On the one hand, what is needed is an ability to hold the other in the frame, not as abject figure of absolute alterity, but as separate from, equal to and essential to the self. On the other hand, and equally dependent on the ability to hold the tension between presence and absence (separateness/connection), what must be resisted is any gesture of appropriation or ‘death’ of the other through assimilation. At one level these are easy words but as the Rachel Dolezal example shows at an individual level (Uluo, 2015;

2017), and as the policy concern with ‘cohesion’ and its impulse to relegate to the ‘private’ any trace of difference deemed ‘cultural’ shows us at the societal level, very hard to enact. This then requires inhabitation of a different kind of triangular space – a space understood as part of psychic structure, which requires acknowledgement of one’s own location in a field of relationality; in which an understanding that one is not always at the centre and has no automatic entitlement to be so; and in which one can look on without being a participant, is the mode of being-in-relation.

Like the captives of the Middle Passage, habitation of this psychic mode of triangular space might make it possible to inhabit the triangular space of captivity and degendering otherwise (see for e.g. queer-of-colour scholars Glave, 2008; Tinsley, 2010; Alexander, 2005). An ‘otherwise’ constitutive of a radical declaration of human presence taking shape as a multitude of gendered, ethnic, sexual becomings. For in the decolonised queer-of-colour imagination, this was (is) a space in which black women claimed “*eroticism* as a wellspring of resistance to colonial symbolic and economic orders...[and wherein] their shipmate-like *feeling* for each other when, as reified, enslaved, *unwomanly* workers they were not supposed to feel” (Tinsley, 2010:20, emphases in original). Here the triangular space of the Black Atlantic can be read otherwise as a space in which those dehumanised claimed their humanity through the eroticization of physical, emotional and experiential proximity and made it the conditions for deep connection (Lorde, 1984). In other words a practice of presencing in a dynamic of presence and absence and declarations of felt completeness, – socially, psychically, emotionally – even in the face of loss.

It is a question of making present in the diasporic conditions and processes of radical hybridity and creolisation that she is to be found – if, and it is a big if, we can see. Edouard Glissant (1997:194) has referred to creolisation as “the encounter, the interference, the shock, the harmonies and the disharmonies among cultures” ... as “unpredictable; one cannot calculate its consequences [it is a force and process that] can only be grasped by the imaginary” (1997:126). This is the site that marks the presence of the black woman as subject – cis and trans, here and there, then and now. And if ever there was a time that she was needed, it *is* now.

It is a place to start. And to start there would be to gather up some of what we might - or even once knew. What in the language of psychoanalysis might be brought to us through free

association and a deconstruction of the dreamwork. Or in another language might be brought to us in the gathering winds of Winti, Candomblé, Santeria, Obeah.

Sarah Reed – Présenté, Présenté, Présenté.





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i An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Association of Psychosocial Studies Annual Lecture in December 2016. My heartfelt thanks to the Association for inviting me and to the lively and engaged audience from whom I learnt much and whose energy sustained me. I hope I do justice to you here. Special thanks to my beloved friend and inspiration, Avtar Brah.

ii The album released by Capitol in 1957 under that title contained tracks that had been recorded between 1949 and 1950. The sliding temporality of the emergence of a mode of jazz called ‘cool’ as the dominant presence for a while echoing the paradoxes of ‘presence’ more generally!

iii Nishnaabeg, also called Anishinaabe, are one of several culturally related Indigenous peoples whose lands traversed parts of what is now Canada and the USA. Others in this grouping of related peoples include the Ojibwe; Ojibwe, Algonquin.

iv The death of Sandra Bland following her being stopped by the police for a supposed traffic violation was the event that gave rise to the #Say her name movement and campaign. She was found hanged in her cell on July 13<sup>th</sup> 2015. This was three days after she had been stopped.

v One need point to no more than the violence and contempt meted out to black lives by the police in Brazil, the USA, UK.

vi Pamela Ramsey Taylor lost her job following a period of suspension and Mayor Beverly Whaling resigned her post.

vii Boris Johnson, the current Foreign Minister of the UK spoke of ‘picaninnies’ etc in 2002 in his *Daily Telegraph* column; Kelvin Mackenzie, once editor of *The Sun*, now just a columnist, spoke of the Everton football player Ross Barkely in terms that referenced ‘gorillas’ in April 2017.